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SUBJECT: Vice Foreign Minister Discusses PM Visit, Religious  
Freedom and WTO in AMCHAM Speech

11. (SBU) Summary: In a recent speech to the American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM), Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang implied that a visit to Washington by Prime Minister Phan Van Khai was almost a sure thing. He described steps Vietnam has already taken to overcome the hurdle of designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom violations. He emphasized that WTO accession is Vietnam's top foreign policy goal, that the United States is key to this and that the GVN would do all in its power to move the process forward by late June when he expects the Prime Minister to be in Washington. Among the deliverables for the visit is a bilateral framework agreement on assistance. In response to a question, the Vice Foreign Minister said that the GVN does not want the Agent Orange issue to "slow down" development of the bilateral relationship. Finally, Bang indicated that, for Vietnam, the upcoming East Asian Summit is not seen as serious competition for a well-established institution like APEC. End Summary.

12. (U) Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang gave a wide ranging talk on U.S. - Vietnamese relations at an AMCHAM lunch on April 19. In addition to AMCHAM members, representatives of the diplomatic corps, NGOs and the press were in the audience. The remarks were off the record.

Diplomatic Priorities: Prime Minister Visit, CPC and WTO  
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13. (SBU) A visit by Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to the United States in the second quarter of 2005 would be an important event. Such a visit would advance Vietnam's efforts to join the WTO, the country's most important foreign policy objective. A PM visit during the tenth anniversary of normalization of relations is appropriate and of historic importance for Vietnam in its own right. The GVN has taken a number of steps during the past year to overcome hurdles to a visit, including addressing the problem of designation as a CPC. VFM Bang was "pleased to report that Vietnam is not under sanction and is working to be removed from the CPC list." A series of discussions with Ambassador for Religious Freedom Hanford in Hanoi and Washington had been productive, he continued. They had discussed a number of actions taken by the GVN to demonstrate respect for religion, such as promulgating a religious ordinance and a decree on Protestantism; laws against forced renunciation of faith would be strictly enforced. Bang said that Vietnam has done virtually everything requested by the United States. The U.S. Congress needs "binding papers" to this effect, however. To this end, Bang and Hanford had prepared "letters" saying that Vietnam had committed to carry out further cooperation on religious freedom and other issues.

14. (SBU) Turning to WTO, Bang said that Vietnam's accession campaign would peak in April and May. The GVN has had some success in advancing negotiations with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, India, China and Australia. Now, the United States is the key country. While in Washington, Bang met with officials in the State Department, White House and USTR. All had agreed to work with Vietnam. Vietnam now has to come up with a very good offer for a bilateral meeting early in May, as well as the coming multilateral in Geneva, in order to move the U.S. bilateral market access talks forward by the end of June. Vietnam realizes it has to improve its offers on telecommunications, finance, banking and distribution. The Vice Foreign Minister said he is aware that USTR will consult with U.S. business on all of these areas. Moreover, Vietnam is committed to passing legislation required by the WTO. The Chair of the National Assembly legislative committee has given assurances that there would be something concrete on paper this year.

15. (SBU) Returning to the PM visit, Bang said that he is happy that the White House was "receptive" to a visit in June. Tentatively, the PM would travel to Washington, Boston, New York and Seattle. Bang is still working out the details and would probably return to the United States at the end of May. He noted that a visit would likely produce

a joint statement and agreements on economic cooperation (note: a framework agreement for U.S. assistance, now in Washington for final approval), scientific cooperation, maritime transportation, adoptions and agriculture. Contracts would be signed; there would be good news for New York Life, ACE, AIG and Boeing, among others. There would also be a framework for the long-term relationship in many areas including human rights, diplomacy and humanitarian activities. He asked U.S. business to work with the GVN to make the visit a success.

16. (SBU) The Swiss Ambassador asked about the respective roles of U.S. veterans groups, the business community, religious groups and Vietnamese Americans in a PM visit. Bang replied that veterans groups, especially veterans in Congress, are very important for Vietnam in establishing and developing the relationship. The GVN would continue to meet with them and foster cooperation in accounting for MIAs. There are extensive efforts to improve relations with Vietnamese Americans. He mentioned the recent visits of former South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and his large group of followers. The latter visit had been an "extraordinary event." Further amnesties of prisoners could be expected in April or May. Overall, the trend in bilateral relations is up; WTO accession and the Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) vote in Congress are the next critical steps. If the PM visit goes ahead, it also would be a high point in U.S.-Vietnam relations.

17. (SBU) An NGO representative asked if humanitarian issues, including the after-effects of the War -- such as Agent Orange -- would come up. Bang said that there is already good work on unexploded ordnance being done by U.S. groups such as the VVAF, as well as other help for the handicapped. Agent Orange is an important and sensitive issue for Vietnam. The GVN is committed to taking care of victims. However, it is not involved in the civil suit in U.S. courts. Moreover, the GVN does not want Agent Orange issues to "slow down" development of the bilateral relationship.

#### APEC and Regional Architecture

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18. (SBU) Changing the subject, an AMCHAM staffer asked if Vietnam would be prepared to host APEC in 2006, given the enormity of the logistics burden. Bang replied that the GVN is working hard to prepare for this important task. The Foreign Ministry is responsible for coordinating this event, and planning is underway. Based on the success of ASEM, the outlook is positive. Asked if Vietnam sees any conflict for the role of APEC posed by the upcoming East Asian Summit, Bang said no. APEC is an important, well-established institution that addresses economic subjects and an expanding list of other specific issues such as counter-terrorism. The Summit is still a work in progress. APEC is the "real one." Bang fielded a question on a bilateral trade agreement under negotiation with China. He said that this is intended to give China an equal ability to export to and invest in Vietnam as that enjoyed by the G-7 countries. Finally, he answered a question about Vietnam's wish for a more important and active global role in the future and whether this would force it to "choose sides." Bang said no. Vietnam would continue to be friendly toward all, hard as this is at times. The country is ready for a stint in the UN Security Council in 2008-9 and, at some point, would even consider participating in international peacekeeping operations.

MARINE